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RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 1026
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 2795
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RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5245
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1926
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 000483

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: MANNAR COULD FACE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

REF: COLOMBO 350

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

11. (C) Summary: Ambassador met with military personnel and civil society members in Mannar on March 21, 2007, to discuss the humanitarian and security situation in the area. Over 8,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) are living on Madhu Church grounds in Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) controlled territory with no immediate solution in sight. IDPs suffer from lack of access to medical treatment, food, sanitation facilities and live under threat of forced recruitment by the LTTE. Should the Sri Lankan Military (SLM) take offensive action in the North, another 50,000 people may flee to areas like Mannar. The deterioration of law and order was creating an enabling environment for abductions, extortion and other crime. Ambassador strongly urged the Sri Lankan military to facilitate the transfer of food and medical supplies to IDPs and reminded them the conflict required a political, rather than a military, solution. End Summary.

12. (C) On March 21, 2007, Ambassador met with civil society members and the Sri Lankan Military in northwestern Mannar District to assess the humanitarian and security situation. The main concern in the District was the IDPs residing on Madhu church grounds in an LTTE-controlled area of Mannar. They are on church grounds to escape forced recruitment by the LTTE. At the time of the meeting, there were over 8,000 IDPs at the church and V. Ravindran, a local representative of UNHCR, said the numbers were quickly growing. The Area Commander of Vavuniya (which includes Mannar), Major General Upali Edirisinghe, said he expected another 50,000 people would flee to areas like Mannar if the military were to push north into the LTTE-controlled Vanni. Existing IDPs were from Jaffna and Vavuniya, where violence is more prevalent (reftel), and many sought refuge at Madhu Church because they believed the Church can protect them from forced conscription by the LTTE. Other IDPs were illegal immigrants whom India

deported back to Sri Lanka. Security restrictions in the District resulted in long delays in food, medical supplies and other goods reaching the IDPs at the Church. The LTTE prevented IDPs from crossing over to government-controlled areas and deterred International NGOs (INGOs) from gaining access to the church.

MANNAR DISTRICT

¶3. (C) According to UNHCR, Mannar District's total population is over 100,000, of which 90% are persons of concern - IDPs or Sri Lankan Tamils returned from India. It is the district with the lowest population density in Sri Lanka, 58 people per square kilometer. Compared to other districts, it is an underdeveloped area with poor access to goods and services. Three out of five divisions in Mannar District are designated as under government control, while two, Madhu and Manthai West, are LTTE-controlled. Civil society members told us the coastal areas of Nannatan and Musali districts are de facto LTTE controlled and 40% of Mannar's population lived in LTTE controlled areas.

LTTE FORCED CONSCRIPTION

¶4. (C) Military personnel and civil society members agreed that the biggest problem in Mannar was the situation of the IDPs at Madhu Church and the threat of forced conscription by the LTTE. Mannar Area Commander, Major General Du Munasinghe, told us that support for the LTTE was waning as people lost faith in their ability to succeed. As a result,

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volunteer recruits for the LTTE were decreasing and forced conscription was on the rise. He estimated that the LTTE had 750-800 cadres in Mannar District. David Igulu of UNICEF told Ambassador that while the LTTE recruits fewer children under the age of 17 than before, forced conscription of children still existed.

¶5. (C) Forced conscription has increased during the last three months. Sithara Shreen (protect) of Mannar Women's Development Foundation told us privately that LTTE women were increasingly forcibly recruiting civilian women by abducting them in a state of undress. Recently a young woman fled her abductor and ran to Madhu Church in her undergarments; however, most women succumb to the LTTE rather than face the humiliation of returning to their communities without clothes.

¶6. (C) There was a prevailing belief among civil society members that the LTTE sought to conscript IDPs from Madhu Church and therefore threatened IDPs and deterred INGO access to the church grounds. Government Agent for Mannar District ¶V. Visvalingam said the LTTE recently fired at a family of three trying to cross over from the church to the government controlled area, killing the mother and child and wounding the father. Bishop Jayappu Joseph, a prominent humanitarian in Mannar, speculated that the LTTE recently killed a teacher in the area to justify keeping INGOs out of Madhu Church grounds for security reasons. As a result, INGOs have not had access to the church for three months and cannot assess the IDPs' situation or offer assistance such as shelter. Multiple sources reported the LTTE was pressuring IDPs to move out of Madhu Church grounds where they would not have the Church's protection. Bishop Jayappu Joseph told Ambassador that he was negotiating with both sides to make Madhu Church grounds a "peace zone" to safeguard IDPs from forced conscription, abduction and being caught in cross fire.

SECURITY REGULATIONS INTERFERE WITH NECESSITIES

17. (C) Security regulations restricted the ability of people living in LTTE-controlled areas to obtain medical treatment, food and sanitation facilities. The security forces set up entry/exit points between government- and LTTE-controlled areas to keep goods that could benefit the LTTE out of its hands and to stop the flow of illicit materials and weapons. The checkpoints were open only three days a week and cumbersome regulations result in long delays before goods can reach IDPs. Igulu gave the example of the cement ban which has caused critical health infrastructure projects at mid-point in construction to deteriorate.

MEDICAL SUPPLIES

18. (C) Claire Meytraud of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) complained that the military did not allow much-needed medical supplies through their checkpoints. Visvalingam said the Government Agent's office could not get surgical equipment to treat injuries through military checkpoints either. He cited an example of an injured lawyer who traveled eight hours to the nearest hospital and died of his wounds en route. Supplies that were available in January still have not made it to the IDPs and immunizations for children were delayed. John Thasor of the Sri Lankan Red Cross said with UNHCR funding they are prepared to deploy mobile health clinics if they can get access. Major General Upali Edirisinghe claimed the military provided enough medical supplies but the problem of getting ICRC medical

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supplies through checkpoints was a "misunderstanding" that was now cleared up. Meytraud said it was not.

FOOD

19. (C) Mannar District is an agriculture-based economy with fishing the primary source of food and income. Over 87,000 families in 52 villages depend on fishing for a livelihood. The traditional practice of night fishing ended when security forces imposed rules restricting fishing hours to 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. and requiring a permit. Only fishing boats with engines of 10 horsepower or less were permitted and no compensation was offered to those who had to buy new engines to comply. Bans on goods such as fuel crippled the ability of farmers in LTTE controlled areas to farm. For example, the unavailability and/or exorbitant cost of fuel meant that farmers had to manually cultivate and mill crops. Father Emilianspillai, Chairman of the Mannar Citizen's Committee, told Ambassador that people were not starving but they were depending on reserves they brought from home and food the World Food Program had provided in the last six months.

HUMAN RIGHTS

10. (C) The human rights situation in Mannar District was not as dangerous as it was in Jaffna or Batticaloa (ref) but there were reports of killings, abductions, disappearances and extortion. Emilianspillai said that there were 15 deaths and 11 disappearances this year. Bishop Jayappu Joseph said the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) Deep Penetration Units used Claymore mines to attack the LTTE in uncleared areas, but 80-90% of the victims were civilians, including women and children. The Bishop also said that paramilitary groups were responsible for most abductions in Sri Lanka. However, in Mannar, the military perpetrated most abductions in order to intimidate LTTE supporters. He credited Major General Mudasinghe with keeping his promise to keep paramilitary groups out of Mannar, resulting in a significantly lower number of abductions in the District. Nevertheless, the paramilitary group People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) committed a few abductions in the area and forced nearly 800 civilians participating in a peace pilgrimage, with a six year tradition, walking from Mannar to

Vavuniya, to turn around.

¶11. (C) Common crimes were on the rise and extortion was a problem, but not to the same extent as other areas in the North and the East (ref). Ravindran said that some common criminals posed as Karuna faction members (ref) to intimidate and extort from their victims. Multiple members of civil society members reported that the police were not responsive, especially to crimes committed at night. Bishop Jayappu Joseph added that the police were increasingly accepting bribes. A Sri Lankan national working for UNHCR told Ambassador he felt security forces harassed him during his off hours because he worked for an INGO.

COMMENT

¶12. (C) Although Mannar seems relatively calm when compared to neighboring districts, it has vulnerabilities that could quickly turn it into an area of crisis. Area Commanders told us the military has "no choice" but to take action in northern LTTE-controlled territory. Edirisinghe's forecast that another 50,000 people would flee as a result means security forces have a responsibility to take humanitarian concerns into consideration to avoid a humanitarian crisis for IDPs and other vulnerable populations. Until now, Major

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General Munasinghe appears to have a constructive working relationship with civil society members, as reflected the District's relative stability compared to its neighbors. Nonetheless, concerns expressed by civil society, the prospect of an additional 50,000 IDPs and Munasinghe's impending retirement all make it imperative that we continue applying pressure on the GSL to prepare for such a possibility and ensure that humanitarian concerns are taken into consideration when making security plans. Ambassador has emphasized these concerns in a letter to the Ministry of Defense expressing his concern over the blockage of ICRC medical supplies.

BLAKE